



Under pressure, underfunded and undervalued: UNISON members keeping communities together.

A comparative research report
for UNISON: Summary and key findings
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Preface

This report presents the findings from the UNISON Local Government Membership Survey 2015, conducted by Incomes Data Research on behalf of UNISON. This survey was undertaken among UNISON members working in a range of local government organisations. It provides a snapshot of the current membership, focusing on their experiences and perceptions of working life in local government.

The survey follows previous research amongst the local government membership undertaken in 2008 by Incomes Data Research (IDS), in 2005 by MORI Social Research Institute and by NOP in 2000 and 2001. It allows UNISON to track changes in opinion over time on some key issues. Other issues, new to this survey, reflect the rise of living costs and the impact on members.

The report looks at views on a number of key employment issues, specifically:

- Working hours and pay levels
- Changes to pay and conditions
- Training and development
- Living costs and debts
- Workplace bullying and harassment.

The report also reflects on members' priorities for UNISON's future agenda and changes in public service delivery.

Executive Summary

These findings lay bare the experiences of over 2,200 UNISON members working in our councils and schools, delivering the local services we all rely on. UNISON last published a survey of its members working in local government in 2008, so this report provides an opportunity to assess the impact of the Government's austerity programme on the workforce that provides our local services.

Since 2010, local government has faced unprecedented cuts to funding by Westminster. Jobs have been slashed and pay and terms and conditions ripped apart as councils struggle to balance their budgets. Pay in local government is now worth 20% less in real terms, once inflation is taken into account, than it was in 2010. There has been little or no investment in the workforce.

While investment in employees is often seen as distinct from investment in services, in reality, the two are intrinsically linked. Those working in local government are on the front-line of delivering public services, face-to-face and often under difficult circumstances. They keep people safe, housed, educated and cared for. Local government workers tell us that protecting pay and conditions is the most important way to help staff provide those services. This is a message we hope comes out loud and clear from this survey.

While health and education workers have a high profile and strong public identity, the work of local government employees remains largely out of the public eye. Their work covers a variety of essential services - trading standards teams protect us from rogue traders, environmental health workers protect the health and well-being of our families, library services also support people with mental health problems. Services like building control defend vulnerable communities and householders while supporting local businesses and our youth services support the education, social and personal development of young people. Meanwhile, social workers help those with learning difficulties in residential care and older people with health, housing or benefits issues and children and young people's services keep families together. These are the people behind the statistics in this survey. Their opinions outlined here cast a spotlight on how neglecting the workforce means you also neglect the services we all rely upon.

In the current context of public sector cuts, frontline workers are also finding themselves under mounting pressure as their colleagues behind the scenes, in administrative and support services, lose their jobs. Without this vital backbone of support to frontline colleagues and service users, the quality of public services is bound to suffer. It might not make front page news, but the public pay the price when support staff are axed.

With an estimated half a million jobs lost in local government since 2010, it is no surprise that those left behind face escalating workloads and pressure. Three-quarters of these workers feel that their workload and pressure have increased in the last year, up from two-thirds in 2008. Sixty per cent are working extra hours beyond their contracted hours. Nearly a quarter are working extra hours that are unrewarded or uncompensated every week.

Pay levels for the workforce are worse than in any other part of the public sector with nearly 30% paid below the level of the real UK Living Wage. This survey highlights the worrying scale of debts among the workforce and the struggle to deal with rising living costs, as wages stagnate. While 60% are finding it more difficult to pay for food, a worrying 42% tell us they have personal debt and nearly a quarter of these owe £10,000 or more.

Meanwhile, local authorities are coping with budget cuts by slashing pay and terms and conditions. Councils see this as the only option left to them to continue to deliver public services. Around three-quarters of workers tell us that terms and conditions such as payments for working outside of regular hours, unsocial hours, overtime and sick pay have all deteriorated since 2010. In the majority of cases, these changes have been imposed.

This means local government workers have been doing more and more for less and less. Over half report that stress at work has affected both their job performance and personal life. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to recognise that this has a knock-on effect upon local services.

With resources at an all time low, those working in councils and schools are overwhelmed by an increasing public demand for the services they provide and respondents in our survey report an increase in expectations from both service users and their employers. Seventy-six per cent report an increase in expectations from their employer in the last year, a sharp increase from 69% in 2008.

In the face of such challenges, training programmes should play an integral role in supporting and stimulating staff and enhancing the quality of public services. However, since the last survey in 2008, the proportion of employees receiving no training in the past 12 months has increased to over a quarter. These are the same occupations - facilities, IT and school support staff - as in the previous survey. This includes 56% of school support staff, 41% of admin and clerical staff, 20% of early years educators and nearly two-fifths of teaching assistants and social work assistants. Worryingly, almost a third of respondents say they have no personal training or development plan. Our findings highlight a shameful lack of investment in employees and services.

There has also been a staggering increase in the percentage of local government workers reporting that they are subjected to abuse at work, whether bullying or harassment, verbal or physical threats, or actual violence. Reports of these incidents have risen from 44% in 2008 to 60%.

Alongside this picture of neglect, the findings highlight a sector facing the challenges of frequent reviews and reorganisations. Sixty-three per cent say that they have experienced a review or reorganisation in the last year, driven by cost-cutting exercises. This is an increase since 2008, when half of the respondents had faced workplace restructuring. It is not surprising that 63% tell us morale has worsened in the last year, again an even worse finding than in 2008.

Yet in the face of these demands, the vast majority of workers demonstrate a willingness to support the implementation of changes in the workplace if they are intended to improve the service to the public. This comes as no surprise to UNISON. The local government workforce has consistently demonstrated a willingness to adapt to workplace change since our first survey in 2001.

UNISON believes that the workforce should be at the forefront of the debate about cuts to jobs and services. While they work under the pressure of a cuts regime, they come home at the end of the day to find the services their families depend upon shredded to the core. Local government workers have a unique insight from being both service providers and users.

Local government workers in councils and schools are playing a crucial role in sustaining local communities through austerity. They deserve a better deal, not attacks on their jobs, and pay and conditions. We will be calling on key decision makers in local and central government to address the issues raised here. We welcome feedback from readers.

Key findings

What follows are the key findings of IDR's survey for UNISON Local Government of over 2,200 of our members working mainly in local authorities and schools. Since the last survey – which preceded the financial crash of 2008 - local government funding has been cut by an average 40% and government public sector pay policies have hit hard at basic pay. The implications for pay, conditions of work, stress, morale and job security are clear to see in the headline results which follow. Staffing, morale, job security and pay have all declined, while bullying and harassment, stress, debt and a desire to find different jobs have all increased.

Local government services and education are at the heart of a decent society and a strong economy. These results should give great cause for concern to all those who believe in their importance and recognise the strong link between the way employees are treated and trained, and the services they provide.

Work pressure and stress

- Against a background of reductions in local government funding, three-quarters of respondents feel that workload and pressure have increased in the last 12 months
- Almost three-quarters of respondents report rising stress levels. An increase from two-thirds in 2008. In some cases, this may be related to rising expectations of employers and service users, as well as increases in stress levels
- Almost half of respondents (46%) feel they have too much work to do and as a result similar proportions feel that stress at work has affected both their job performance (54%) and personal life (52%)
- Staffing shortages are a major issue, with just below three-fifths of respondents reporting frequent staff shortages

Morale and job security

- 63% of respondents believe morale has worsened over the last year, compared with just 5% who reported an increase in morale in their working area or department
- 38% report job losses in their department over the last year and 43% feel less secure in their job than they did last year

- While 38% of respondents are worried about job security in the coming 12 months, almost double that proportion (62%) are concerned about job security in the longer term. In 2008, the respective figures were lower, at 25% and 50%
- 59% of respondents have considered leaving their job in the last 12 months and 38% of these are actively looking for alternative employment (a third of whom are looking for work outside their area of work)
- Feeling undervalued, low pay and a lack of promotion prospects are the key reasons local government workers have considered leaving their current job, but they have stayed in their jobs because they continue to enjoy the job and remain committed

Pay

- Median gross pay for full-time staff is £24,000 (compared to £27,600 in the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings, ONS, 2015), for part-time staff median gross pay is £11,376, and for those working term-time only is £11,983 regardless of hours worked
- Over 50% of both part- and term-time only staff have gross annual earnings below £12,000
- The full-time gross median salary of men at £26,304 is 13% higher than the corresponding figure for women, standing at £23,268
- Topping the pay league are chief officers/senior managers, with full-time median gross annual pay of £50,889
- At the other end of the spectrum are teaching/classroom assistants and staff in facilities with full-time median annual pay of £15,534 and £15,689 respectively
- In between these extremes are eight broad occupational groups with median full-time pay of between £20,000 and £30,000 per year. These include finance professionals, IT staff and children's care workers
- Further, there are two groups with median salaries around £31,000 a year – local authority professionals and engineers/architects/surveyors
- Overall just 29% of respondents think they are fairly paid for the work they do
- Furthermore the survey shows term-time only staff are least satisfied with pay

Living costs and debts

- Some 70% of respondents report that living costs have increased over the last 12 months, while just 26% report an increase in their personal income

- Some 60% of respondents are finding both food costs and general living costs, including buying clothing and footwear, more difficult than 12 months ago
- 42% of respondents have personal debt and a worrying proportion of those (24%) owe £10,000 or more

Changes to pay and conditions

- Almost half (46%) of respondents report changes in their pay and conditions since 2010, 85% of whom report pay and conditions have worsened
- Around three-quarters of respondents report conditions for working outside of regular hours, performance-related pay, car allowances, overtime pay, sick pay, unsocial hours payments and unpaid holidays have all deteriorated
- In the majority of cases these changes have been imposed, rather than agreed

Reviews and reorganisations

- 63% of respondents have experienced a review or reorganisation since 2010, mostly driven by cost-cutting exercises
- Work reviews and reorganisations were reported to have negative consequences, with the main outcomes being reduced staffing levels, fewer resources and worse ways of working
- Employees believe that protecting pay and conditions is the most important way to help staff to provide better services, followed by job security guarantees and better funding for the sector
- The vast majority of survey respondents support the implementation of changes in the workplace if this would lead to improved service provision for the public

Working extra hours

- Just below 60% of the sample report working extra hours beyond their contracted hours. On average full-time staff work an extra 3.1 hours a week, part-timers 2 hours and term-time 2.8 hours.
- Overall 23% of respondents work extra hours that are unrewarded or uncompensated
- Two-thirds (65%) of all staff work overtime at short notice, but there are significant variations by occupational category
- The survey also shows that senior managers and homecare workers are the professions most likely to be called upon to work extra hours at short notice

Bullying and harassment

- Incidences of abuse at work have increased since 2008 with 60% of respondents having been subjected to at least one form of abuse, either bullying/harassment, or verbal or physical threats as well as actual violence
- Verbal abuse from service users is the most common form of abuse
- Occupations most at risk of threatening behaviour are children's care workers, adult care workers, library staff, professional staff and school support staff
- Survey respondents consider employers as generally effective in ensuring general health and safety, preventing violence at work, making adjustments for disabilities, preventing racial harassment and helping staff to return to work after long periods of sickness absence
- However, as in 2008, the employer's policies to prevent stress were deemed to be less effective, as, to a lesser extent, was their approach to supporting victims of violence

Training and development

- The survey shows some positive findings on training and development with almost three-quarters of respondents having undertaken some form of training in the last year
- However, the most common form of training to have been undertaken is health and safety, closely followed by job-specific training
- While 89% of respondents found the training useful in their current job, only 72% thought the training helped future career development
- 68% of respondents either have an agreed training and development plan, or have discussed and agreed training needs with their line manager
- Among some groups, relatively large proportions reported receiving no training over the past 12 months – for example some 40% of administrative/clerical staff were in this position

Contracts and working arrangements

- While the vast majority of respondents are employed on permanent contracts (98%), analysis by age shows that 71% of those aged 16 to 24 are less likely to be employed on permanent contracts
- The majority of respondents (97.9%) work defined contracted hours

- A significant minority report having more than one job – 8% provide details of a second job and 1% a third job. Multiple jobs were more common among school support staff, teaching assistants and those working in facilities
- Occupational groups with a large proportion of women show a higher prevalence of part-time working than groups with a larger proportion of men, who are more likely to work full-time hours
- Women are more than twice as likely to work term-time only, while men are twice as likely to work full-time than women
- Just over a third of respondents (37%) work a standard ‘9-5’ work pattern, and many work ‘unsocial’ hours

Priorities for action by UNISON

- Out of 23 options given, 12 were marked as important by over three-quarters of respondents
- Job security emerged as the most important issue for local government workers with 98% of respondents indicating it as ‘fairly’ or ‘very’ important as a priority for action, closely followed by equal pay for work of equal value (97%), more pay (96%), a decent pension (93%) and job-related training (91%)

